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⑥ TELEVISION AND ITS VIEWERS: WHAT SOCIAL SCIENCE SEES,

⑩ George/Comstock

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TELEVISION AND ITS VIEWERS: WHAT SOCIAL SCIENCE SEES

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Television and human behavior is a topic that will always have its
question marks. There are many reasons. The procedures of social science
are too imperfect. The questions are too many and too difficult. Both
the medium and human society are too subject to change. Nevertheless,
in the 25 years since television began its conquest of the environment,
there has accumulated a sizable scientific literature about the
relationships between the medium and people.

Two-and-a-half years ago at The Rand Corporation, we began an
evaluation of the state of scientific knowledge about television and
human behavior. We are now completing the final chapters of a book-
length treatment of our conclusions. In addition, three Rand reports
covering the research done in behalf of that volume have been published
(Comstock and Fisher, 1975; Comstock, 1975; Comstock and Lindsey, 1975).

It is sometimes said that very little is known about television
and people beyond the popularity of the former and the fickleness of
taste of the latter. This is not really true, if one is willing to
accept a scientific definition of "known." That is, there is a great
deal "known" if one is willing to define that concept as a state in
which there is verifiable evidence that disposes an observer toward
one or another set of possible facts or explanations without estab-
lishing that such is the case with absolute certainty.

We found that the relevant literature amounts to over 2,300
items. The variety is so great that no simple or concise statement
is possible. For example, the studies include:

o A psychologist who modified the thumb-sucking of a young
   child by shutting off the set whenever the act was performed
   (Baer, 1962).

o A team of epidemiologists who videotaped the living room
   behavior of Kansas City, Missouri, families from mobile
   units parked in their yards while they watched television
   (Bechtel, Achelpohl, and Akers, 1972).

o   An international battery of sociologists who recorded the
time spent on television and other activities, including work
and sleep, in major industrial cities throughout Western
Europe, the United States, and Latin America (Szalai, 1972).

o   The psychologists who filmed children's expressions as they
watched one man attack another in a violent television
portrayal and related the degree to which those expressions
revealed positive or negative emotional reactions to the
children's later inclination to help or hinder another
child in playing a game (Ekman et al., 1972).

o   The many social psychologists who have compared the sub-
sequent aggressiveness of children and adolescents who
viewed violent television with the aggressiveness of those
who saw no television or less violent television, with the
aggressiveness measured in such varied ways as the voicing
of insults (Wells, 1973; Feshbach and Singer, 1971), the
punching of a Bobo doll (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963a,
1963b), the playing with guns or knives (Liebert and Baron,
1972), the infliction of electric shocks (Berkowitz and
Alioto, 1973; Berkowitz and Geen, 1966), and actual physical
interpersonal aggression (Steuer, Applefield, and Smith,
1971; Parke et al., in press), in such varied settings as
university psychology laboratories, classrooms, homes and
residential schools.

o   The many social scientists who have investigated television's
role in politics, including the effect on West Coast voters
of early predictions of the Presidential winner based on
East Coast returns (Fuchs, 1965, 1966; Mendelsohn, 1966;
Tuchman and Coffin, 1971; Lang and Lang, 1968b); the effects
of televised debates between Presidential candidates (Kraus,
1962); the degree to which television sets the agenda of
issues and personalities to which the public gives attention
(McCombs and Shaw, 1972, 1974); the role of television in
reshaping the events of which it is supposedly a neutral

reporter (Lang and Lang, 1953, 1968a); the effects on voters
of exposure to television news and televised political
advertising (McClure and Patterson, 1974a, 1974b; Dreyer,
1971; Rothschild, 1975; Atkin, et al., 1973; Chaffee, Ward,
and Tipton, 1970); and, of course, the effects of television
on the conduct and outcome of political campaigns (Mendelsohn
and Crespi, 1970; Robinson, 1972; Blumler and McQuail, 1969;
DeVries and Tarrance, 1972).

o   The analysts of content, who have measured such varied attri-
butes of the medium as the quantity and character of violence
in entertainment (Gerbner and Gross 1973, 1974; Gerbner,
1972); the content and bias of television news (Frank, 1973;
Russo, 1971; Singer, 1970; Stevenson, et al., 1973; Efron,
1971); sex stereotyping in cartoons (Levinson, 1973), in
family programs (Long and Simon, 1974), in commercials
(McArthur and Resko, in press), and in drama (Seggar and
Wheeler, 1973); trends in regard to portrayals of blacks
in entertainment and cartoons (Dominick and Greenberg,
1970); the behavior of the characters in soap operas
(Katzman, 1972); the way various occupations are portrayed
(DeFleur, 1964); and, the methods employed by characters
in dramatic entertainment to outwit antagonists, overcome
barriers, and achieve goals (Larsen, Gray, and Fortis, 1963).

Clearly, we can only draw some meaning from this diverse array
if we focus on specific themes. Let us take four major ones:

First, the role of television in behavior modification.

Second, the influence of television on the way people spend their
time.

Third, the contribution of television to politics.

Fourth, what the American public thinks of television.

Before we begin, certain caveats are necessary. Science by its
very nature is always tentative. Social science is particularly so,
because of the clumsiness of its tools. The findings we will review
have the status of hypotheses for which there is some support. We

should not mistake that status for "proof" or "incontrovertibility,"
two criteria that are largely beyond the social sciences.

TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

There are two kinds of behavior modification that follow communi-
catory experiences--voluntary and involuntary. In the first instance,
the individual enters into an implicit contract regarding the outcome.
Examples are education and smoking control. In the second, there is
no such contract. An example would be a change in the probability of
engaging in some behavior as the consequence of being entertained.
There is evidence that television can contribute to both voluntary
and involuntary behavior modification.

Voluntary Modification

As you know, television can be an effective teacher (Chu and
Schramm, 1968). However, its instructional capacities are not limited
to the conveying of facts, manual skills, or presentations that sub-
stitute for the ordinary instructor-student relationship. It appears
that television can also modify behavior that is nuisancesome or
pathological.

Such modification is in its infancy. Nevertheless, the work done
so far suggests that the medium is far from limited to instruction,
entertainment, and news.

The key is apparently that the observation of the behavior can
alter the viewer's inclination to behave in the same way. Television,
in this instance, "teaches" that the world is a little different
than the viewer thought or provides a model which the viewer can
emulate.

Let us look at some examples:

o   The subjects are children between the ages of four and seven
    whose parents report that they are afraid of the dentist.
    They are divided into two groups. One group sees no film.
    The other group sees a film about an eight-year-old boy. The
    cast includes a four-year-old girl and a dentist's chair. The

boy climbs without fear into the chair while the girl, who is
visibly frightened, watches. As the film progresses, the girl
loses her fear. At the end of the film, the girl climbs
voluntarily into the chair. The group that saw the film
increased in its willingness to visit the dentist, while
the group that saw no film did not (Poulos and Davidson, 1971).

o   The subjects are preschool children afraid of dogs. The
design is similar. One group sees films of Disneyland and
Marineland. The other group sees a series of films in
which young children interact to a progressively increasing
degree with a dog. The group that saw the dog-and-children
films increased in their willingness to approach and play
with a dog. The group that saw the Disneyland and Marine-
land films did not. Moreover, the decrease in fear proved
to be maintained a month later (Bandura and Menlove, 1968).

o   The subjects are preschool children who are considered to be
socially withdrawn. The design is similar. The experimental
film portrays a child of the same age as the subjects
engaging in successively more demanding social activities,
and at each stage being rewarded for participation. Those
who saw this film increased markedly in social interaction
within the setting of the nursery school (O'Connor, 1969).

Television has also been used with reported success in various
adult therapeutic situations. The usual procedure has been to employ
television to provide feedback to the patient that would otherwise
not be possible.

Here are some examples:

o   Group psychotherapy sessions are videotaped. The patient
then views the proceedings in the company of the therapist
and sees his behavior removed from the emotion-laden cir-
cumstances in which it occurred. As a result, several
therapeutic forces are set at work. There is added feed-
back to that already provided by the group. The patient's

"direct confrontation" with himself gives him a sample of
the perspective of those with whom he interacted (Danet, 1969).
There is also an attack on the psychological defense of
denial. This is the maneuver in which the individual
restructures the past so that what is agreed upon by observers
is believed not to be true by the individual. The video
provides a not-easily refutable correction (Melnick, 1973).
Furthermore, the opportunity to reexperience the events in
a reflective state is said to encourage the acceptance by
the viewer of things about himself which he would reject in
the more argumentative interaction with therapist and fellow
patients (Berger, 1971).

o Marriage and family counseling sessions are videotaped (Alger
and Hogan, 1969; Hogan and Alger, 1966). It is claimed that
a more democratic exchange results, because therapist and
client have access to the same record; that communicatory
patterns are better revealed; and, that family members are
able to become more objective about themselves. These are
presumably all steps toward a successful resolution of
whatever the problem(s) may be.

In both these cases, one key would seem to be the accuracy and
faithfulness to events which television can achieve.   There is no
other means of transcribing events that combines television's audio-
visual veracity with portability and convenience.

Involuntary Modification

Involuntary behavior modification occurs when there is a change
in behavior as the result of exposure to some communication and the
change was not consciously sought by the individual or someone
legitimately responsible for him. "Brainwashing" is an example.
It has received much popular attention as a major part of F. Lee Bailey's
defense of Patty Hearst. The concept is inherited from the experience

of American prisoners in the Korean War who were subjected to a calculated program of physical discomfort, isolation, and information manipulation to alter their attitudes and subsequent behavior (Schein, 1956). We are inclined to think of involuntary modification as rather sinister and involving such exotica as radio-activated brain implants, mood-altering drugs, hypnotism, and conditioning of the sort dramatized in Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*. However, it also has an everyday face. We are surrounded by the media from birth to death, and we encounter many messages that we do not seek. We sometimes respond in ways that we would not have expected or are not readily conscious of as a response traceable to exposure to the media. This is an unseparable part of modern life, but it is also involuntary modification of behavior.

The fact that television is supported by the sale to advertisers of access to audiences is implicit evidence that television can be persuasive when its messages are designed to be. However, there is also evidence that at least under some circumstances its entertainment programs can maintain or alter behavior.

The majority of research has been devoted to the modification of the behavior of children and adolescents, and in particular to the question of the influence of violent television entertainment on their subsequent aggressiveness. There are many issues unexplored, but the accumulated evidence does permit the tentative acceptance of certain propositions.

It was once widely argued that television violence has a cathartic effect on young viewers. The viewer presumably would act out his hostile impulses vicariously as he watched the violence on the screen. As a result, exposure to television violence would reduce subsequent aggressiveness. Although it seems obvious that such an effect must occur for certain individuals, there is no evidence that it is a typical occurrence (Goranson, 1969). When exposure to television violence does reduce subsequent aggressiveness, and it has been demonstrated that it can do so, it appears to be the result of the violence heightening anxiety about aggressive impulses, thereby leading to increased self-control (Berkowitz and Rawlings, 1963).

On the contrary, the most justifiable interpretation of the total
array of findings is that the viewing of television violence increases
the likelihood of subsequent aggressiveness on the part of children
and adolescents (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1962; Bogart, 1972; Chaffee,
1972; Comstock, 1972; Goranson, 1970; Krull and Watt; 1973; Liebert,
Neale, and Davidson, 1973; Shirley, 1973; Singer, 1971; Surgeon
General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social
Behavior, 1972). There are some very important caveats to be made.
The first is that this conclusion does not rest on a single irrefut-
able demonstration that the effect is an everyday event of real life,
but on the convergence of findings from a variety of studies, each
of which has its own weaknesses for inferring real-life impact. The
result is that subsequent studies could overturn the conclusion. The
second is that the research tells us very little about other functions
or purposes for the young served by violent television drama. It
has been suggested that it may teach empathy and other socially
desirable reactions (Hyman, 1973). Third, we know very little about
the degree of social harm, if any, attributable to this relationship.
The impact may be negligible, or it may be large.

The evidence comes from three major sources:

o   Experiments which demonstrate that the observation by
     children of a television portrayal may lead to imitation
     of that portrayal.

o   Experiments which demonstrate that the observation by
     adolescents of a television portrayal of interpersonal
     violence may increase their level of aggressiveness toward
     others.

o   Various surveys which find a positive correlation among
     young persons between aggressiveness and the amount of
     violent television viewed.

Let us look at a typical imitation experiment. The subjects
are nursery school children. They are divided into four groups.

One group sees a live adult attack a Bobo doll in a number of specific ways--with fists, by kicking, with a mallet, by throwing rubber balls, and by verbal abuse. The second group sees the same attack by a human being occur in a televised portrayal. The third group sees the same attack occur in a televised portrayal, but this time the attacker is a costumed "cat lady" such as might appear in a cartoon. The fourth group sees no attacks of any kind. Afterwards, each child is taken to a playroom where there is a Bobo doll and the other paraphernalia available to the attacker. The child's behavior is surreptitiously observed. The children who saw the attacks--live human, televised human, or cartoon-like--performed many more acts resembling those of the attacker than those not exposed to the attacks. In addition, the children who saw the cartoon-like portrayal performed more behavior like that in the portrayal than those who saw no attacks, although the degree of imitation was less than in the case of the live human (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963a).

Three hypotheses are supported. First, the observation of a televised portrayal can result in the imitative display by young children of what has been portrayed. Presumably, the children who saw the televised attacks acquired responses previously novel to them. Second, the effects of televised and real-life experience can be similar. This is indicated by the fact that both the attacks by the live human and by the televised human resulted in increased imitative aggression. Third, cartoon-like portrayals can have an influence similar to that of portrayals involving humans. This suggests that whatever we may infer about the influence of television on children, Saturday morning programming cannot be considered exempt simply because it largely consists of cartoons.

Let us look at another imitation experiment. The subjects again are nursery school children. They are divided into three groups. One group sees a televised sequence in which an adult attacks a Bobo doll in the same specific ways as before--with fists, by kicking, with a mallet, by throwing rubber balls, and by verbal abuse. At the end, another adult rewards the attacker by serving candy and soda. The second group sees an identical televised sequence except

that instead of a reward the second adult punishes the attacker by tripping and spanking him. The third group sees the same sequence, except that there is neither reward nor punishment. Again, after seeing one of the film portrayals, each child is taken to a playroom with a Bobo doll and the other paraphernalia and his behavior is surreptitiously observed. The groups that saw the attacker punished engaged in many less aggressive acts like those of the attacker in the film than the groups that saw the very same aggressive behavior but also saw the attacker either rewarded or not punished. However, when the children were offered a small reward for performing the acts they had seen, the differences disappeared (Bandura, 1965).

Two hypotheses are supported. First, that the way that an aggressive act is portrayed on television can affect its influence on children's subsequent imitation. In this instance, reward for portrayed aggression was shown to increase the likelihood of imitation. Second, that even when there is no performance of portrayed behavior, such behavior may have been added to the repertoire of the young viewer. The implication is that to some degree such acquired behavior may be stored for use at a later time.

Let us look at a typical experiment concerned with the effects of television violence on adolescents. The subjects are college males and females. They are first angered by receiving electric shocks administered by a confederate of the experimenter as feedback in an experimental puzzle-solving task. Then, they see a film portrayal of a very violent boxing match from the film *Champion* under a variety of circumstances. Or, they see a nonviolent film.

Later, the puzzle-solving task is repeated, but this time the subjects have the opportunity to deliver electric shocks to the confederate. In one of the circumstances for viewing the violent film, the subjects are told the name of the experimenter's confederate is "Kirk," the same as the victim in the fight film. In the other circumstances for viewing the violent film, the events behind the portrayed fight are depicted either as making the beating administered to the victim justified or unjustified. The adolescents who saw the fight film delivered a higher level of shocks than those who saw the

nonviolent film. The adolescents who believed the confederate had the same name as the film victim delivered a higher level of shocks than those who believed the names were not the same. The adolescents for whom the film beating was depicted as justified delivered a higher level of shocks than those for whom it was depicted as unjustified (Berkowitz and Geen, 1967).

Three hypotheses are supported. First, the televised portrayal of aggression can result in increased aggression by adolescents against another person and that aggression so affected can be different in kind from what was observed. Second, similarity between the elements of the portrayal and the real-life situation can stimulate such effects. In this case, it was the overlap of names. Third, the likelihood of such effects are enhanced by the portrayal of violence as justified.

Of course, as a method the experiment is limited because it measures behavior in a restricted, artificial context. However, it has the strength of permitting causal inference, and in the experiments cited and in about 75 other experiments published in reputable scientific journals, there is a clear demonstration within the context of the experiment of the modification of behavior by exposure to television.

There are also experiments with similar results where the circumstances are relatively if not wholly nonartificial. Let us look at one. The subjects are the teenage residents of three schools for delinquent boys in the United States and Europe. In each school, the boys are divided into two groups. One group sees a series of violent films during a week, including *Death Rides a Pale Horse*, *Champion*, and *The Chase*. The other group sees a series of nonviolent films. Everyday interaction is recorded for three weeks before the film week, during the film week, and for two weeks after the film week. During and subsequent to the viewing of the films, the sum of verbal and physical aggressiveness is greater for the boys who saw the violent films (Parke et al., in press).

When we turn to evidence from everyday life, we find a number of instances in which there is a positive correlation between measures of aggressiveness and the viewing of violent television entertainment

(McLeod, Atkin, and Chaffee, 1972a, 1972b; Lefkowitz et al., 1972;
Chaffee, 1972). Furthermore, the data indicate that the relation-
ship is not explained by more aggressive youths preferring more
violent television (Chaffee, 1972).

These are the threads of research which converge toward the con-
clusion that television violence can modify behavior in the direction
of increased aggressiveness. It must be emphasized that our know-
ledge is largely limited to the direction of the effect. We have no
index of the actual degree to which real-life aggressive behavior,
whether against person or property, whether relatively acceptable or
open to police intervention, is influenced by television.

The television industry, under pressure from the Federal Com-
munications Commission and the Congress to which the social science
evidence contributed to at least some small degree, adopted in 1975
the "family viewing" hour during which violence is restrained in
primetime. The effects--on families, on children, and on television
during the "family" hour and later in the evening--are yet to be
evaluated. However, we can readily recognize that if television does
contribute to actual social harm, the remedy may not be so easily
found.

We do not have an index of its quantitative impact, but we do
know that in certain rare circumstances especially provocative
portrayals can result in dangerous antisocial behavior on the part
of very few, presumably emotionally unstable individuals. The
clearest example was the tendency for airliner bomb threats to follow
upon the broadcasts of the Rod Serling play, *Doomsday Flight*
(Bandura, 1973). If it turns out that the major threat is such
singular productions, rather than the general level of television
violence, we may be unable to protect ourselves before the fact
because of uncertainty over the eventual impact of a given portrayal,
and our concern not to censor the arts or the media.

There is also some evidence that one factor contributing to
increased aggressiveness subsequent to the viewing of violent tele-
vision may be its capacity to arouse the viewer physiologically
(Tannenbaum and Zillmann, 1975). The corollary is that arousing but
nonviolent content may also increase the level of subsequent aggressive-
ness, and there is some evidence to support this proposition (Zillmann,

1971; Tannenbaum, 1972). If arousal is a major factor, and if it often *follows upon exposure to nonviolent content,* violence reduction may be a remedy high in appeal but low in curative effect.

TELEVISION AND OUR TIME

Television also influences human behavior by the attention given to it by the audience. The television industry is primarily interested in how this attention varies among programs and networks and how it can be maximized. There are, however, a number of other questions that can be asked, and on which there is some scientific evidence. They include the kind of behavior that accompanies viewing, the place of television in total leisure time, and the influence of television on other activities.

Viewing Behavior

What do people do when they view? Often, something else. In one study families were videotaped while they watched television in their own homes (Bechtel, Achelpohl, and Akers, 1972). It documented what we know--"television viewing" is an activity *interruptus,* a discontinuous experience with spurts and disconnections that is often accompanied by some other activity, which in these particular video records most often was eating. In addition, attention to the screen while "viewing" rises and falls depending on what is being shown, with commercials getting the lowest attention (about two-thirds of the rating for the content most attended to, movies).

Television and Leisure

In 1965, a team of UNESCO social scientists engaged in an extraordinary investigation of the way modern humans spend their time. Diaries of 24-hours of activity were obtained from large samples in each of 15 industrialized cities located in the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America (Szalai, 1972; Robinson, 1972; Robinson and Converse, 1972). Because spending time with the mass media was one of the activities recorded, these data tell us how television fits in with the rest of daily life.

Americans spend about 40 percent of their total leisure time with television. The time spent with television is three-fourths of the total time spent with the mass media. Among 37 primary activities recorded, television ranked third behind sleep and work as a consumer of time. When the United States was compared with other countries, the U.S. consumption of television per capita was highest, but surprisingly when only persons with access to a set were examined, the amount of viewing per day was surprisingly similar despite the great differences in cultures and programming.

Influence on Other Activities

The same UNESCO data tell us something about the impact of tele-vision on other activities, because they permit the comparison of owners and non-owners of sets in sites where ownership is not universal. The two most striking effects seem to be an increase in time devoted to the mass media, and a decrease in time devoted to sleep, although the fastidious might argue that the apparent decrease in attention to household tasks is equally noteworthy. When set owners and non-owners are compared across the 12 countries, set owners spend about an hour a day *more* in mass media consumption as the result of the time devoted to television, and about 13 percent *less* time sleeping. Set owners also spend less time attending social gatherings away from home, listening to the radio, reading books, engaging in miscellaneous leisure activities, attending the movies, conversing, watching tele-vision away from home, and doing household tasks.

The impact of television is best evaluated against the effects of other major innovations. In temporal terms, the effect of the auto-mobile on time spent on transportation and the effect of major appliance ownership on time spent on housework has been slight compared to the full hour's increase in mass media consumption and the necessary readjustments in other activities apparently attributable to tele-vision (Robinson, 1972). Television has done no less than reshape daily life.

TELEVISION AND POLITICS

This year, each network will send crews of between 500 and 800 to cover the presidential nominating conventions, and coverage of the primaries has been extensive and competitive. The list of television's major political events is long, and includes the Nixon "Checkers" speech, the "great debates" between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960, the Kennedy assassinations, the long count in 1968 before Nixon clearly became the winner, and the Watergate hearings. There are many instances in which television campaigns appear to have won Congressional or gubernatorial elections.

Television has clearly transformed American politics, yet it would be an error to attribute too much to television exposure *per se* in the way of voter turnout or choice. Television has more clearly affected politicians. It has encouraged the manipulation of the nominating convention so that the performance carried by television makes a favorable impression, altered the organization of campaigns so that television access through the news or paid advertising is a major thrust, and redirected the expenditure of campaign funds toward the media (Mendelsohn and Crespi, 1970).

Despite noteworthy exceptions, effects on voter turnout and choice are less certain. The reasons include the tendency for many voters to make up their minds early in the campaign, before there is much exposure to campaign-related television; the typical presence of long-standing predispositions toward one or the other of the major parties; the inclination for people to "filter out" information contrary to their own viewpoint; and, the conflicting and self-canceling nature of the various political news items and paid advertisements carried by television. They also include the fact that political situations vary widely and there are often some unique elements, which makes the absence of any general or typical effect of exposure to television not so surprising.

The most widely accepted view of television's influence is that it has the very limited effect of strengthening or maintaining predispositions (Klapper, 1960). This is an important effect, but not one that appears in the form of changed votes.

However, we should not ignore the very many conditions under which strong effects may occur. For example, four studies of the effect on Western voter choice and turnout of the broadcasting of early East Coast returns and computer projections in 1964--returns and projections that made it clear that Johnson would be the winner over Goldwater-- found that the broadcasts had little influence (Fuchs, 1965, 1966; Mendelsohn, 1966; Tuchman and Coffin, 1971; Lang and Lang, 1968a). We should not forget that this was a race in which feeling was strong and Johnson's lead was established so well before the election that most voters had taken it into account in reaching their decision. Such notice about trends might well alter voter decisions and electoral outcomes when it disconfirms expectations.

Television has a greater opportunity to affect voters the later in the campaign they make decisions. There is some evidence that the number of "undecideds" is growing, and that television is especially favored by them for political information. Television also has a greater opportunity to affect voters who do not identify with a political party. There is evidence that such party identification has been declining since 1952 (Dreyer, 1971). In both cases, there is a historical trend which may lead to an increase in the political influence of television.

There are other factors which suggest that television's influence may be increasing. Between 1952 and 1974, expenditures for paid political broadcasts increased 600 percent, six times the rate of inflation (Rothschild, 1975). Television advertising is usually thought of as primarily having a persuasive impact, but with tele- vision news devoting so much attention to visual coverage rather than issues, political advertising may become a major source of information about the positions of candidates. Furthermore, because the broad- cast of paid advertising cannot be predicted by the viewer, people cannot avoid messages as easily as they can with convention coverage or news commentary.

Because degree of exposure to television does not seem to dramatically influence voter turnout or choice during campaigns, this

should not lead us into the error of dismissing television as a political factor. Television is the stage on which personalities and issues play out their political roles. Politics has fitted itself to television, and television in turn has increased the public's vicarious participation in politics. Politics has been altered, and it may be altered still further by television in the future if, as some observers believe, long-time political loyalties are lessening, established voting patterns are dissembling, and politics is becoming less stable (Blumler and McLeod, 1974).

TELEVISION AND THE PUBLIC

What do the American people think of television? We know that they think it is better to have the set on than off. The most recent Nielsen figures indicate that in the average household television is on between six-and-a-half and six-and-three-quarters hours per day, and that during the preceding decade television use per household increased steadily.

There have also been many criticisms of television. When we turn to public opinion surveys designed to discover the general public's evaluation of television, we find that (Steiner, 1963; Bower, 1973; Roper, 1975):

o   The public's overall evaluation of television is largely favorable.

o   Between 1960 and 1970, the public became somewhat less satisfied with television. Although viewing increased, so did complaints, while praise declined.

o   The most criticized aspect of television are the commercials. About 70 percent of Americans believe there are too many commercials. However, 70 percent also believe commercials are a "fair price" to pay for the medium.

o   When compared with other media, television has become increasingly favored by the public. In 1960, the public was about equally divided between television, magazines, and newspapers as to which presented things most intelligently and was most educational, and newspapers led television

by ten percentage points as "doing most" for the public.

By 1970, television led on all these points by a clear margin.

No aspect of television has drawn more controversy than network news. During the Nixon years, it was generally portrayed by Administration officials as unfair, too liberal, biased, and the product of an elite out of touch with the average American.

The fact is that the public as a whole evaluates television news very, very favorably. The public not only believes it to be their major source of news but thinks it to be the medium to believe if there are conflicting or different reports of the same news item (Roper, 1975). There is no evidence that either liberals or conservatives are more dissatisfied or disturbed over the balance of television news (Bower, 1973). About half of Americans believe television reporting to be "more objective than it is biased" while only about a third believe it is "more biased than it is objective" (Hickey, 1972). Furthermore, the degree to which there is criticism tends to be self-canceling. For example, in 1971, about 25 percent believed bias *for* the Administration and about 25 percent believed there was bias *against* the Administration (Hickey, 1972).

About 65 percent of the American people say that they usually get most of their news "about what's going on in the world today" from television (Roper, 1975). It must be emphasized that this is a perception or public declaration in regard to television's symbolic status. It does not "prove" that this is indeed the case. In fact, the evidence is that the public's declarations overestimate the true role of network news because far fewer watch it than most would guess. For example, in a national sample of 7,000 adults, more than half did not watch a single national evening news program over a two-week period.

In sum the relationship between the American public and television is one of love-hate. The public dallies endlessly with it, carps but accepts the faults as a fair price for the pleasures, acclaims it the major source of news yet does not fully pay attention to its reports.

THE SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF TELEVISION

In the past, social scientists inadvertently have probably contributed to an impression that television's noteworthy effects are minimal. This has occurred because they have tended to reserve the conclusion that television has an important effect for instances in which there has been some large, independent impact on the average viewer, and typically they have not found one. We are becoming more sophisticated in our thinking. It has always been recognized that television has its influence in conjunction with a multitude of other variables; that it may only have its influence when some particular set of circumstances are present; that it may only have a particular effect on viewers with special characteristics; and, that its independent contribution to any outcome may be small. What has changed is that it is now widely acknowledged that such impact, although quantitatively small, may be large in terms of social importance. The shift of a percentage point in an election would appear trivial until it is remembered that Kennedy defeated Nixon by a smaller margin. Shifts of small magnitude in other areas also often represent important social effects. There is no general statement that summarizes the scientific literature on television and human behavior, but if forced to make one, perhaps it should be that television's effects are many, typically minimal in magnitude, but sometimes major in social importance.

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